

November 19, 2012

With Lawyers and Judges On Hand, Local Families Celebrate New Adoptions



Most days, Steptoe & Johnson partner Gary Morgans is a public utilities lawyer, handling complex regulatory matters for corporations. But on November 17, he was in court supporting a very different type of client: a family finalizing an adoption.

Morgans' client was one of 26 families to have adoption papers officially signed during the District of Columbia Superior Court's annual Adoption Day ceremony. The families took center stage, but it was also a day of celebration for the lawyers, social workers, judges and others who worked behind the scenes to connect loving parents with children in the city's public child welfare system.

The difference in a child's life once they've been placed with a new family is "a night and day situation for them," said Morgans, who has been handling adoption cases pro bono for a decade. Steptoe is one of several firms where lawyers take adoption cases referred by the Children's Law Center.

Judges were on hand to formally approve the adoption of 34 children. Presiding Family Court Judge Zoe Bush, also an adoptive parent, said in her remarks that Adoption Day, now in its 26th year, is the "best thing" that happens in the Superior Court building. "It's up to us to make sure [children] find those forever families," she said.

Besides the 26 families who formalized adoptions on Saturday, 197 families completed adoptions in Superior Court during the 2012 fiscal year. Barbara Harrison, an anchor with the local NBC affiliate and longtime supporter of Adoption Day, noted in her remarks that there are 120 children in the city's child welfare system waiting to be adopted.

Rhonda Stanley was in court Saturday to finalize the adoption of her two grandchildren, 3-year-old Da'Quan and 5-year old Da'Ja. Stanley said it was a long, but generally smooth, process. "I didn't have any horror stories," she said.

Stanley was there with Maureen Japha, a lawyer with the Children's Law Center who handled her case. "It's an emotional day, to see all these families and what they've gone through to get to this place," said Japha, a loaned associate from Covington & Burling.

Guest speaker Reese Hoffa, who won the bronze medal for shot put at this year's summer Olympic games in London, described his own experience going through an adoption as a child. "Home to me, on that day, after that day, was a place I knew I was always loved," he said. He added that he held a special place in his heart for his adoptive family as well as his birth mother, who put him up for adoption after realizing she couldn't care for him.

Washington Mayor Vincent Gray (D) spoke about first encountering widespread disorganization within the city's child welfare system when he led the Department of Human Services in the early 1990s. He said the system had greatly improved over the past 20 years, noting that the number of children in foster care has been cut in half, from about 3,000 in the early 1990s to 1,500 today.

Referring to the city's openness to different types of adoptive families, including single parents and same-sex couples, Gray said, "We have come to an age of enlightenment."

National Law Journal photos by Zoe Tillman. Above, Barbara Harrison holds three-year-old Demetria Jackson, as new parents Leroy and Leola Jackson look on.



From left: Brenda Donald, director of the Child and Family Services Agency; Mayor Vincent Gray; Barbara Harrison; Superior Court Chief Judge Lee Satterfield; guest speaker Reese Hoffa; and Superior Court Judges Zoe Bush, Hiram Puig-Lugo, and Carol Ann Dalton.



Barbara Harrison holds six-year-old Miles Pledger, whose adoption was finalized during the ceremony.



To the left, Superior Court judges wait to sign adoption decrees.



Adoption Day guest speaker and Olympic bronze medalist Reese Hoffa.

Posted by Zoe Tillman on November 19, 2012 at 02:24 PM